

Islamists Drive Cairo Church Shut Down

Hundreds of Muslims, angered by the prospect of a government-closed church re-opening in their neighborhood, protested outside the church yesterday, causing the provisional military authority to back away from its promise to allow Orthodox clergy to reopen it.

Protesters started gathering on Thursday afternoon outside the Church of the Virgin Mary and St. Abraam in Ain Shams, a poor section of northeastern Cairo. The church was scheduled to reopen that day, but protestors surrounded the building, preventing anyone from getting into it and trapping priests who were inside.

Several people were injured in fights between the Copts and the Muslims. Protestors threw rocks at each other, according a witness. One Coptic bystander was seriously injured, another witness said, when he took out a cell phone camera to record the protest and a group of Muslims surrounded and beat him. Several Copts were arrested, according to church officials.

It was unknown if any of the Muslim protesters have been arrested.

Peter Rizq, a lay minister at the church, said he, the priests and others trapped in the building found a way to sneak to safety after Muslims threatened to kill the head priest of the congregation.

"He [the priest] told us, 'We need to go home now,'" Rizq said. "He told us we couldn't stay any longer in the church because it would cause more problems."

The men left the church building one by one, but some of them were later arrested and charged with illegal possession of

weapons, a charge Rizq said was untrue.

Intimidation

This is the second time the church has been closed because of local Muslim opposition. Three years ago, in November 2008, Egypt's State Security Intelligence service closed the church building after a group of protesting Muslims blocked the entrance.

Prior to their attempts to open the church building, members of the congregation held meetings in two rented apartments. Eventually the congregation gathered donations and bought a plot of land with a building, converting the inside of it into a worship place. Other than signs outside the building, there were none of the structures traditionally associated with a Coptic Orthodox church, such as crosses or domes.

Problems started soon after the renovations began. A group of Muslims bought a piece of land across from the church building and hastily started constructing a mosque. When the mosque was still unfinished, the Muslims blocked access to the church building; on the day it was scheduled to open, they placed prayer mats in front of the makeshift mosque, extending the rows to the entrance of the church.

The church building has been closed since the confrontation in 2008.

Coptic Demand

In March, in response to an attack against the Church of the Two Martyrs St. George and St. Mina in Sool, protesters filled the front lot of the Radio and Television Building in Cairo, demanding among other things that the Church of the Virgin Mary and St. Abraam be reopened.

On March 4, a group of rioting Muslims set the Church of the Two Martyrs on fire to punish the Christians for a

relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim woman. The church building was left in ruins but rebuilt by the military one month later.

Military officials conceded to the demands of the Christian protesters in March but were slow to fulfill promises to allow the church to reopen. The issue was given new impetus after a set of attacks in Imbaba, Cairo on May 7 in which 15 people were killed and two churches were attacked, one of which was nearly gutted by the fires set by members of the Salafi movement.

The rioters claimed they were attacking the churches to free a woman they said had converted to Islam from Christianity and was allegedly being held against her will by Coptic priests.

Salafi Muslims claim to pattern their beliefs and practices on the first three generations of Muslims. They have attacked Christians increasingly since the Jan. 25-Feb. 11 uprising that led to the ousting of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Rizq said normally relations between Copts and Muslims in his community are peaceful.

"In general they are very friendly, as neighbors and friends and invite each other for weddings and celebrations," he said. "But when it comes to building a church, they all stand up and disagree with it."

Rizq said all the congregation wants is equal protection under the law. "We want the law to take place," he said. "A decision was taken by the government and the prime minister, so we want everything to be official, done according to the law."

Rizq added that all was quiet at press time but still very tense. Imams were walking through the area surrounding the church building "calling for jihad," but the army had cordoned off the area. A meeting convened by the army took place

Saturday between the priests of the church and the Islamic elders of the community.

Despite this overture, Rizq said he has little hope the church will ever open.

"100 percent don't think they will open the church there, because they [the Muslims] are completely against the idea of having a church there," he said. "Even yesterday someone [a protester] said, 'You can open up the church, and I will go and blow myself up inside it.'"